NEW MEDIA AND THE MILITARY'S MESSAGE

by

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DEDICATION

This research report is dedicated to the men and women of the United States Air Force, Marines, Army, Navy and Coast Guard, who serve this country not for reward or recognition, but because they believe that this country and its citizens are worth defending at any cost ... and to their families, without whose sacrifices no military members could serve. To those who have dedicated their lives to the service of this country, I offer my most heartfelt gratitude and my utmost respect.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When the World Wide Web made its debut in the early 1990s, those in the communications field began looking at the Internet as a new platform to disseminate information. Those in traditional communications fields such as newspapers, television and radio, as well as public relations practitioners worldwide, began to use the web to deliver the news and spread their messages to the public.

In addition to public relations practitioners and traditional media, the U.S. military also viewed the World Wide Web as a means of disseminating information. In addition to the Department of Defense website, the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard all have their own sites, focusing on service-specific news and information. While the sites contain information geared toward military members, such as pay tables, education information and career path guidance, the websites are also used to provide up-to-date information to the media and the public, such as news releases, photos, video clips, transcripts of speeches and more.

As a public affairs officer in the United States Air Force, I have spent a great deal of time searching for the most effective means of communicating messages not only to our internal military audience, but to the media and the public at large. I am particularly interested in the military's use of the Internet as a means of distributing information to the media. As the public affairs career field shrinks in the Air Force, more and more reliance is being placed on

websites as a means of information dissemination. In this study, I examined the military's use of websites to disseminate information to the media in a qualitative study using personal interviews with military website content producers as well reporters and a limited textual analysis of the Multi-National Force Iraq website, http://www.mnf-iraq.com/.

While some research does exist on the use of the Internet by public relations practitioners, it is limited. Published research and literature on the use of the Internet by military public affairs officials is even more lacking. There is little information available to help understand what military public affairs officials hope to gain with their websites, what strategies they employ to market their information, what their communication goals are, or what potential areas could be improved on military websites.

In a time when the United States is heavily engaged in conflicts in the Middle East, it is more important than ever for the military to effectively communicate with not only the media, but with the public taxpayers whose support is necessary for the military to operate. This research into the purpose and structure of military the MNF-I website identifies some disconnects between the goals of the website's content producers, and what the members of the press who use the site were looking for, and offers some suggestions for reducing those disconnects.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In a study of the United States military's current methods of message communication, it is important to understand its long and constantly evolving relationship with the press in the U.S., and its traditional means of disseminating information. In addition, an understanding of public relations practices and methods of communicating is necessary. This chapter will examine the history and evolution of the relationship between the U.S. military and the press, and provide a brief overview of public relations practices and use of evolving technology as a means of information dissemination.

The development of military public affairs

For more than 200 years, the relationship between the U.S. military and the media has been constantly evolving. At its best, the relationship could be described as cordial, and at its worst – acrimonious. It was during the Revolutionary War that military leadership on both sides of the battle realized the power of the press to help them achieve their goals (Snyder, 2003). Both sides used the infant press to put out propaganda in their favor, and at a time when the Continental Army desperately needed support from the public, General George Washington used the press to "forge the public's will to win and establish a people's army by distributing pamphlets and exposing truth about British rule" (Holm, 2002, p. 59). However, Washington also complained that newspapers loyal to England undermined the patriotic morale of those in favor of independence, while he felt that patriotic publications "lacked the most elementary notions of military secrecy"

(Porch, 2002, p. 2). This is one of the earliest examples of the debate between those arguing for the public's right to know and those emphasizing the U.S. military's need to keep some information classified.

In the years following the United States Revolution, the relationship between the press and the military improved little. During the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson jailed and attempted to court martial the editor of a local newspaper who had published an article during the New Orleans campaign in 1814 without submitting it for approval (Porch, 2002). By the time of the Mexican War in 1846, technology had improved enough that reporters in the field could send their reports by telegraph and Pony Express, improving the timeliness of news reports, and resulting in competition among reporters for daily news (Pritchard, 2003). During this period, newspaper accounts were still up to 10 days old, and reporters often used military "camp newspapers" as a primary source of information. (Pritchard, 2003).

The further spread of the telegraph led to increased tensions between the media and the military, as press reports often arrived to political leaders as well as the general public before official reports, and military leaders often felt the press was undermining the war effort (Porch, 2002). This tension between the military and the press only increased during the U.S. Civil War. The press leveraged this new technology far better than the military at the beginning of the war. Where reporters were routinely filing stories via the telegraph at that time, the military still relied on trains or carrier pigeons to get their reports to headquarters or civilian leadership (Snyder, 2003).

During the Civil War, the military began to realize the impact the media could have on public opinion and troop morale, and also realized that they were woefully

unprepared to deal with professional war correspondents. At this time, the military had no personnel trained to deal with the media, and neither did they have a good grasp on technology. They realized that the media would not hesitate to criticize the military or the government, and would go to great lengths to get their stories (Snyder, 2003). Soon after, the military began training public affairs officers, whose main duty was to deal with reporters and to disseminate information to the public.

It was during World War I that the government and the military began to try and put tight restrictions on the press. President Woodrow Wilson issued executive orders giving the U.S. military power to control the media. With this authority, General John J. Pershing issued General Order Number 36, which required all U.S. news reporters covering the war to be accredited. This lengthy process required reporters to prove their trustworthiness through "a personal appearance before the Secretary of War, an oath to write the truth, and by submitting a $10,000 bond to ensure their proper conduct in the field" (Snyder, 2003, p. 9).

In addition to these restrictions, President Wilson created the Committee on Public Information, otherwise known as the Creel Committee for its head, former newspaper editor George Creel. The purpose of this committee was to mobilize public opinion in support of the war effort. The committee also placed tough restrictions on publication of sensitive military information, including troop movements, sailing schedules, locations of anti-aircraft defenses, etc., which the press voluntarily abided by (Pritchard, 2003).

Taking the restrictions a step further, the U.S. Congress passed the Espionage Act of 1917, and the Sedition Act of 1918, which between the two basically forbade

publication of any information that might be seen to aid the enemy, and prohibited

criticism of the U.S. government or its military. Any reporter who violated these acts

faced a stiff sentence of up to 20 years in prison (Snyder, 2003).

Creel's Committee mounted a propaganda campaign unlike any before in U.S.

history, and some argue there have been none like it since. Creel himself stressed the

importance of his propaganda machine in his 1920 book, *How We Advertised America:*

the first telling of the amazing story of the Committee on Public Information that carried

the gospel of America to every corner of the globe, in which he wrote:

> There was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium
>
> of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion
>
> picture, the telegraph, the cable, the wireless, the poster, the sign-board--all these
>
> were used in our campaign to make our own people and all other peoples
>
> understand the causes that compelled United States to take arms. All that was fine
>
> and ardent in the civilian population came at our call until more than one hundred
>
> and fifty thousand men and women were devoting highly specialized abilities to
>
> the work of the Committee, as faithful and devoted in their service as though they
>
> wore the khaki (Creel, 1920, p. 5).

In addition to paid staff, the committee had a volunteer services corps known as

the Four-minute men whose 75,000 members spoke around the country rallying support

for the war through patriotic messages. While restrictions were tight and U.S.

government propaganda efforts in full swing during World War I, the press offered little

resistance to the measures, because most saw them as necessary for national defense (Porch, 2002).

World War II has sometimes been called the high point of the military-media relationship, and probably involved the earliest practice of media embedding. It was a time when the majority of the country supported the war effort, and the press often reflected the patriotic mood of the country in their reporting (Porch, 2002). President Franklin D. Roosevelt had created the Office of Censorship in 1941 to monitor and censor war coverage, and later created the Office of War Information to disseminate propaganda, yet reporters were treated as one of the team by the military. Once accredited, they were allowed access to regular military forces via press camps that were attached to the forces. Accredited correspondents were given officer's uniforms with no rank insignia, and had relatively free access to combat theaters (Porch, 2002, Pritchard, 2003).

During World War II, war correspondents like the much-beloved Ernie Pyle, traveled for long periods of time with military units, and sent columns back to the United States that spoke warmly of the young men in combat. Pyle was trusted by commanders as well. In a column from 1943, he wrote, "There was no hedging [from officers]. I've never known an instance where correspondents were not told, with complete frankness, what was going on" (as quoted by Tobin, 1997, p. 70).

Despite U.S. reporters' relative cooperation and self-censorship during this period, some military commanders still resorted to coercion to control the press. General Douglas MacArthur regularly required reporters' copy to go through several layers of

censorship in the field, and pressured the reporters to write stories that portrayed him in a favorable light (Pritchard, 2003).

Relatively free access for reporters was still the order of the day in the beginning of the Korean War. However, press criticism of United Nations commanders and security slip-ups by the media led the Defense Department to again impose censorship restrictions on members of the press toward the end of the conflict (Holm, 2002).

Up until the time of the Vietnam War, the press had, for the most part, accepted the military's restrictions, viewing them as necessary if reporters were to have any access at all to troops in the field. On the other side of the coin, the military tolerated the media because they were allowed to censor their articles and because laws that forbid release of certain military information allowed commanders to maintain relative control over what was reported. Generally, the military realized that the patriotic feelings in the U.S. would prevent reporters from printing too many negative stories. However, all that would change in the country's next conflict overseas – Vietnam.

The Vietnam War was an unprecedented benchmark in the military-media relationship, because the U.S. military decided early on not to impose press censorship. Members of the media were free to roam about the country, using military transport when it was available, and freely filing stories, photos, film footage, etc. (Pritchard, 2003). This was called the country's "first TV war," because for the first time, those on the home front could watch scenes of battle in their living rooms on the five o'clock news (Porch, 2002). However, it was this lack of censorship of the press that some say led to the deterioration of the relationship between the military and the media. It soon became clear that what the Johnson administration was saying and what reporters were being told in

official military briefings in Saigon – which the press soon dubbed the "Five o'Clock Follies" – was vastly different from what reporters were seeing for themselves on the ground in Vietnam.

After the Tet Offensive in 1968, when it became clear that claims by the U.S. administration that the U.S. was on the threshold of victory were untrue, the press adopted a much more critical tone and coverage began to focus on the high numbers of U.S. military dead, and the anti-war protests on the home front (Porch, 2002). As public support for the war waned, and the U.S. ultimately withdrew its troops from Vietnam, the military turned its anger toward a press it blamed for the country's defeat in the Vietnam War. This feeling that the press had lost the war for the U.S. became deeply engrained in military leaders, who carried this attitude with them as they rose through the ranks (Pritchard, 2003).

The military's distrust of the media lingered, as did the media's doubts that the military would tell them the truth. This state of affairs continued in the 10 years following the Vietnam War, leading the military to ban media access to operations in Grenada in 1983. Again, it was a battle between the public's right to know and the need for military operational security. Nearly 600 journalists flocked to Barbados to cover the invasion, but they were left there without military transport for the duration of the operation (Holm, 2002). Journalists were furious over this action, and protested loudly to the Department of Defense (DoD). In response to this media outcry, the DoD formed the Sidle Panel, chaired by retired Major General Winant Sidle, to address the issue (Holm, 2002). The panel recommended that press pools be used when no other means of providing access to combat was feasible, and suggested that "planning should provide for

the largest press pool that is practical and minimize the length of time the pool will be necessary before 'full coverage' is feasible" (Machamer, 1993, as quoted by Holm, 2002, p. 60).

The first test of this new plan was the invasion of Panama in 1989, Operation Just Cause, which was a dismal failure from the standpoint of military-media relations. Poor planning prevented the media from witnessing any operations, as they were notified and deployed late. After being sequestered at Howard Air Force Base and sketchily informed by military channels, these late arrivals in the media pool would "only watch as [independent] reporters already on the ground in Panama covered the fighting" (Holm, 2002, p. 60).

This series of mistakes led to the formation of yet another panel, led by former Associated Press reporter Fred Hoffman. Hoffman found that the military placed insufficient importance on media planning, and that more attention should have been paid to the development of military public affairs operations (Snyder, 2003, p. 14). In addition, the report recommended strongly that ground commanders support the military pool.

It looked like things might be improving at the outset of Operation Desert Shield in 1990, when Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney quickly activated a 17-member media pool only to learn that Saudi Arabia's King Fahd refused to grant the reporters visas to enter the country. It was only after CNN began reporting from Baghdad that King Fahd was persuaded to lift the ban on reporters in his own country. (Porch, 2002).

As Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm in late 1990, the military began employing standard public relations tactics such as crisis management and

public affairs escorts for media members. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell stressed to his commanders the importance of including pubic affairs planners from the beginning of operational planning, and the public affairs staff worked to improve overall attitudes about the media among military commanders (Pritchard, 2003). Pritchard (2003), notes that the coverage of the Gulf War "was the most comprehensive to date," (p. 14), however, tight restrictions on media movements, poorly-organized press pools and the lack of military transport quickly led to complaints by the media that the Pentagon was censoring information and restricting the media's ability to cover the war.

There was little improvement during operations in Somalia (1993-94) and Haiti (1995), and Operation Allied Force in Kosovo (1999) brought the media-military relationship to a new level of tension. From the beginning, the press was skeptical of information provided by the military, and because the majority of the war was executed from the air, media could not see for themselves what was happening on the ground, leading the media to represent the conflict as a "'sterile war' fought by nameless, out-of-sight pilots" (Holm, 2002, p. 61).

While efforts to improve the military-media relationship were made by the military in the ramp-up to operations in Afghanistan following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, initially, the efforts were still lacking. In December of 2001, after the onset of operations in Afghanistan, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clark apologized for shortcomings in the military's preparedness "to support news organizations in their efforts to cover U.S. military operations in Afghanistan" (as cited by Snyder, 2003, p. 16). Lack of detailed public affairs guidance, lack of a comprehensive communications equipment package, distrust of the media and problems

deploying media in and out of theater were all shortcomings cited in after-action reports by military public affairs officials (Snyder, 2003).

As technology advanced in the late 1990s, the U.S. military could no longer control the media as they had in previous wars. New technology like the Internet, cable and satellite television greatly influenced how information was disseminated and presented. Battlefield news could be reported in real time, and technology allowed better images of battle than in any previous conflict (Katovsky & Carlson, 2003). In addition, Middle Eastern news sources like the 24-hour Arabic cable television news channel Al-Jazeera began to expand and provide other perspectives.

The military realized that if it was going to have any influence or input into what the media were reporting it needed to work to improve its relationship with the media. As the U.S. made preparations in late 2002 and early 2003 to take its anti-terrorist operations into Iraq, the U.S. government made an unprecedented effort to include media in operational planning from the beginning. With approval from the Bush Administration, preparations were made to embed journalists with combat units, and to allow them unfettered "real-time" reporting without censorship or security review. More than 600 journalists completed the required one-week mini-boot camp required to familiarize them with military operations and equipment, and as troops rolled into Iraq in March of 2003, members of the media were with them (Pritchard, 2003).

Soon, military public affairs officers as well as commanders began to realize the benefits of having media with them in the field. In his chapter, "Media Gatekeeper and Troubleshooter," from Katovsky and Carlson's *Embedded* (2003), U.S. Army public affairs officer Col. Guy Shields wrote about his experiences with embedded media:

Because of instantaneous reporting from the battlefield, the media were inside our

decision cycle. There was absolutely no way to place any spin control. The

media were right there. They were reporting. So don't even think about trying to

BS them. You could not put spin on what the embeds were putting out. That was

very beneficial. You had 600 pieces of the battle coming out with no spin. If you

put together all those 600 individual pieces, you can get a pretty good overall

picture (p. 75).

Initially, the arrangement between the military and the media seemed to be

working. The media had front-row seats on the battlefield, and free reign to file their

stories. The military had positive coverage of their units in the press. However, it didn't

take long for whispers of criticism to crop up from both sides. Some in the military felt

that allowing media virtually unrestricted access to the combat theater risked breaches of

operational security, as when Fox News correspondent Geraldo Rivera was kicked out of

the military unit he was traveling with after drawing a map in the sand on television

showing the unit's location. In addition, inexperienced reporters focusing on just one

aspect of the conflict risked presenting a false impression of the operation. While

military leaders may have had a clear strategy in mind, those without experience could

interpret the "real-time" reports as showing a haphazard, disjointed operation (Pritchard,

2003).

For the press, the criticism of media embedding lay in the possibility of reporters

developing too close of a relationship with the troops they were traveling with, leading to

the possibility that their reports would be biased by their friendships and a dependence on

the military for their safety. In a comment on the military's choice of the word "embed,"

some reporters began to accuse the embedded reporters of being "in-bed" with the military, and some even accused media participating in the embed program of being "in-bed" with President Bush (Stang, 2003).

At the time of this writing, the war drags on, and the news media is again being accused by the military of focusing only on the negative aspects of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than focusing on positive accomplishments such as school openings and humanitarian missions. However, some reporters have implied that embedded reporters are manipulated into writing positive stories after forming strong bonds with the members of the units they travel with and depend on for food, shelter and protection. Professor Doug Kellner of the University of California, Los Angeles, even called embedded reporters "propagandists who often outdid the Pentagon and Bush Administration in spinning the message of the moment" (Kellner, 2003 p. 3).

Through the years, the military-media relationship has undergone a myriad of changes on both sides. As the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq continue, that relationship continues to change. One of the biggest changes in recent years has been the manner in which the military disseminates information to the media, which brings us to the next section of this study – a look at the military's use of the Internet as a means of communication.

The Internet and public relations efforts

Through the years, military public affairs officials disseminated information by the same traditional means as most other public relations and media firms – through press conferences, press releases, telephone calls and advertisements. More recently, the U.S.

military has tried to provide the media and the public with more information through the use of the Internet. While there is some research on the use of the Internet for communication and dissemination of information, it focuses mainly on public relations practitioners in the civilian sector. Most research available through military channels focuses on how commanders effectively communicate to their internal audience, rather than how they can most effectively disseminate information externally to the public and the media.

In the mid-1990s, when the Internet was still in its infancy, most research focused on ways public relations practitioners could use cyberspace to increase their visibility with clients and customers. Marken (1995) saw the Web as an inexpensive and effective means for public relations practitioners to reach potential customers and to "educate, inform and persuade the organization's many publics" (p. 36). However, he advised that a company could not just throw together a website and hope that customers would find it. Instead, his research pointed to the need for a Web team to manage everything from information services and marketing, to advertising and customer service. He added that successful Web pages deliver value and provide information to Internet users.

One of the first researchers to conduct an in-depth study on public relations practitioners' use of new technology like the Internet and e-mail was media researcher Johnson (1997), who looked at how new technology affects public relations practitioners' roles, changing from more of a technician toward more of a management role. Johnson found that before new technologies such as the Internet, many public relations practitioners were mainly concerned with "producing materials – such as brochures, videotapes, newsletters, news releases, and so forth" (Johnson, 1997, p. 215). However,

as practitioners employed more new technologies, they often moved more into a management role, where they participated in the decision-making process and helped plan public relations programs (Johnson, 1997). In addition, what she discovered in her research was that many of the public relations practitioners she interviewed chose to employ new technologies to reach a particular audience they could not reach before, like the under-35 age group or those in rural areas.

Others felt that new technology like online forums allowed for more open and candid communication, because there was a certain amount of identity masking that could be accomplished online. Johnson (1997) also found there was a knowledge gap about new technology between older public relations practitioners and younger ones. Some were hesitant to employ new technology because they did not fully grasp how to use it themselves. Others felt that new technology is the way of the future, and companies that did not fully take advantage of this technology were putting their employees and their company at a disadvantage (Johnson, 1997).

A later study by Hill and White (2000) found that most public affairs practitioners interviewed had no real means for measuring the effectiveness of their websites, and did not know if journalists and the public found their sites useful. This study focused more on public relations practitioners' perceptions of the Internet as a communications tool, and problems they encounter in trying to maintain, evaluate and control their websites. The researchers found that many public relations practitioners placed a low priority on their websites, because they had other, more pressing things to focus on. In addition, participants felt their websites were not living up to their potential, and reflected poorly on their organization (Hill & White, 2000). Most participants did not see the Web as a

replacement for other traditional means of distributing information, and rather than lessening their workload, many saw it as increasing their workload. This could be a particularly salient point of interest for the military, especially during a time when some services, such as the Navy and the Air Force are cutting personnel in the public affairs career field.

Unlike previous studies in which public relations practitioners saw the Web as increasing their workload, Porter and Sallot (2003) found that practitioners used the Web to aid them in their day-to-day activities, to directly reach their publics and to engender two-way communication. The pair furthered research on public relations and the Internet by looking at the relationship between what roles practitioners play in an organization and how they use the Web. The researchers found that "the World Wide Web is playing an increasingly prominent part in the strategic practice of public relations," (Porter & Sallot, 2003, p. 615).

One of the emerging uses for the Internet in public relations is in crisis communication, which is especially important for the military, which has to deal with things like aircraft crashes, humanitarian crises and emergency situations on a regular basis. Researchers Taylor and Perry (2005) found that the use of new media tactics during difficult times helps rebuild consumer trust in the affected organization. They found that during crisis situations, the best public relations firms employ both traditional tactics and new media tactics to communicate with the public. These tactics include such things as press releases, fact sheets, questions and answers written by the firms for dissemination to the media and the public, letters and memos, two-way communication, multimedia effects, real-time monitoring of ongoing news and connecting links to third-

party websites (Taylor & Perry, 2005). Websites allowed the practitioners to provide up-to-date and accurate information that could be updated as frequently as necessary with emerging news.

Although existing research on public relations and the use of the Internet was not done with military public affairs in mind, the basic public relations findings still apply, and the research serves as a good foundation for further study. For the military, existing research on the Internet as a communications tool provides a solid foundation which points to the effectiveness of websites as a means for streamlining information flow, for increasing the amount of information that can be made available to the press and the public and as a tool that can be constantly updated with the latest information and breaking military news.

In addition to its growing importance to the military as a means of communication, the Internet has also become an important research tool for members of the media. One recent study showed that journalists are using the internet more and more to find things like background information for stories and to gather data from state, local and national government sources (Garrison, 2004). While many journalists who participated in Garrison's (2004) study said they relied more on other more traditional means of newsgathering, such as personal interviews, telephone calls, faxes and mailed documents, Garrison (2004) found that the Internet is quickly becoming a standard tool in reporters' arsenals for collecting information.

Looking at the various tools available to the military and the media in terms of methods of communication and information gathering provides a solid background with

which to evaluate the method that is the focus of this study – the Multi-National Force –

Iraq website.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to try to discover the goals of the builders of military websites, what strategies the site managers employ to market the information and what the communication goals are, as well as to gather feedback from major print media outlets which use the websites for information gathering.

Because the United States is currently engaged in a conflict in Iraq which often dominates coverage in the mainstream American press, I chose to focus specifically on the Multi-National Force – Iraq (or MNF-I) website. This site was selected because it is the official website of the Coalition Forces' highest military command in Iraq, and all media requests for information and accreditation must go through the Combined Press Information Center at the MNF-I Headquarters.

This chapter will examine the methodological triangulation, or use of multiple methods, I used to collect and interpret my data. Flick (1998) states that "the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry" (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). By combining more than one method, in this case, qualitative personal interviews with both military and media sources, and a limited textual analysis, I was able to add depth to my inquiry by looking at more than one aspect of the MNF-I website. Combining these methods allowed me to not only gain perspective from the producers and users of the website, but it allowed me to examine the website myself to see what themes and messages emerged from the artifact.

For this study, I chose qualitative methods rather than quantitative methods because the information being sought included personal opinions and in-depth information about the goals of the producers and users of the website and the perceived usefulness of the site. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) tell us that the field of qualitative research involves an interpretive approach, meaning that qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. In addition, "qualitative researchers seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables, not processes" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8).

While quantitative research could provide statistical information on things like how many users visit specific military sites, and what percentage of users find the information helpful, qualitative methods allowed for in-depth interviews with those in charge of providing content for these sites, and allowed insight into what content producers and media users feel is, and is not effective about this particular site. In addition, these methods allowed for detailed feedback from members of the media who use the MNF-I websites as a source of information. As Johnson (1997) found, "the qualitative approach to data collection enables us to delve into practitioners' views and assumptions about these areas from their frames of reference, and reveal patterns among them" (p. 221).

For this particular study, I used Strauss & Corbin's (1990) Grounded Theory approach, in which all information is data, and theories emerge from, or are grounded in, the data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) write, "the grounded theory approach is a set of

qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon" (p. 26). In this case, I allowed themes to emerge from my examination of the MNF-I website, as well as from interviews conducted with website content producers as well as members of the press. Their comments and areas of focus led to categories that could be analyzed.

Personal Interviews

In the field of qualitative research, the interview allows the researcher to delve "deeply and broadly into subjective realities," which makes it one of the preeminent methods in the field of communications, as well as in other social science research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 170). In addition, the qualitative interview offers the researcher flexibility in the way in which research can be conducted. Interviews can be done in a wide variety of places, from a research lab to a restaurant, or even over the phone (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In addition to remarkable adaptability, the qualitative interview also allows for different types of interviews, including structured, semi-structured, group, individual or other types of interviews such as oral histories or creative interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

For this study, I used semi-structured interviews, which allowed for some scripted questions, but through open-ended questions, also allowed respondents to take the interview in a direction other than what was on the script. This approach differs from more structured interviews where interviewers ask a standard set of questions to elicit similar answers from each participant, allowing easier comparison. While structured, closed-ended questions might allow for a more predictable pattern of answers, this format does not allow the interviewee much leeway to be spontaneous or to use their own

conceptual schemes in their answers. Using a semi-structured format allowed the interviewees a freer environment in which to open up and share their personal knowledge and experiences.

In this case, I conducted interviews with a mid-level public affairs officer at the Multi-National Force – Iraq Combined Press Information Center as well as the noncommissioned officer in charge of the Multi-National Force – Iraq website. These public affairs professionals not only work on the website, but also have day-to-day interaction with the media through the MNF-I press desk. On the media side, I interviewed a mid-level military correspondent from the *Washington Post*, the foreign press desk chief from the *Chicago Tribune*, and two senior military correspondents from *USA TODAY*. These media outlets were chosen because they are among the top six print news outlets in the United States in terms of circulation according to the Audit Bureau Circulation (Top, 2007), a non-profit association of magazine and newspaper publishers, advertisers and advertising agencies. In addition, all three newspapers cover the War in Iraq on a consistent basis. The interviewees were chosen through a convenience sample – all were available and willing to be interviewed when contacted - and because all have experience working with the military on a regular basis.

Because all of the interviewees were geographically separated, I conducted the interviews by telephone. While this method is not as ideal as interviewing in person, by working from an interview guide to provide consistency in the interview format and taping the telephone conversations, it was still an effective means of gathering data. In addition, some interviewees feel more comfortable discussing things over the phone rather than face-to-face, and some people will disclose thoughts to a researcher because

they never expect to meet them in person or talk to them again after the interview is conducted (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In initially contacting the potential subjects, I used an introduction script to introduce myself to each interviewee, explain the purpose of my study, and gain verbal consent from each interview participant. Once the participants had agreed to the interviews, I sent each one a consent form, which further explained the purpose of the study, detailed the option to remain anonymous, and let each participant know how the interview tapes would be secured. Each telephone interview was audiotaped, allowing me to go back and transcribe the data for later analysis. This also ensured that important facts were not overlooked or omitted accidentally in typed notes.

After the interviews were conducted, the tapes were transcribed into text format, and coded for categories or themes. First, each individual transcript was thoroughly reviewed, and areas that the subjects seemed to prioritize or focus on were noted. I then compared the interviews to see if there were any similar patterns or themes that emerged. As the data emerged from my interviews, I was able to analyze and categorize the data into meaningful information, based on the conceptual schemes provided by the participants. In other words, by looking at what areas the interviewees seemed to emphasize, I was able to gain an understanding of what their priorities were as far as gathering information and data from the military.

Textual Analysis

In addition to personal interviews with producers and users of the Multi-National Force – Iraq website, I was able to add depth to my findings by using textual analysis to look at the website as an artifact. Textual analysis allows the researcher assess the impact

of visual and textual materials by exploring their connotative and denotative properties, which allows for the gleaning of both direct meaning and underlying ideological assumptions in a given text (Johnny & Mitchell, 2006). In addition, examining the construction of messages and the ways in which they function together to produce an effect can help us better understand the artifacts (Foss, 2004).

In analyzing Internet media, it is important to look not only at the artifact itself, but also at how it might parallel offline communication, how it differs from other offline genres, any attempts to address a particular audience, and whether or not it invites feedback or interactivity (Hart and Daughton, 2005). Because actual dates of the website homepage are not archived on the site, in this case, I selected a convenience sample of dates, Sept. 24, 2007, and Oct. 8, 2007, to examine the MNF-I homepage, and the links targeted to the media. In addition, I reviewed the stories archived for one month's time, which was all that was available on the site, as well as the photo gallery archive, and then compared stories found in mainstream media reports for the same days through a Lexis-Nexis search. Specifically, I was looking for the answers to emerge to questions such as: Who is the target audience? How are messages conveyed (through photos, through stories, through messages from the troops)? How does the information provided mirror traditional public affairs tactics? Do any trends appear?

By combining the inductive methods of textual analysis, a grounded-theory approach and personal interviews, I was able to gather meaningful data that I then analyzed and used to achieve my research goal of better understanding not only the purpose and mission of the Multi-National Force – Iraq Website, but also whether this site is an effective means of communicating with the media.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

After analyzing and coding the data, a number of themes emerged which have

been organized into three dominant areas of focus. The first is a disconnect between

what content the Multi-National Force – Iraq's (MNF-I) provides, and what the media is

looking for. While members of the media interviewed here find some useful information

on the site, most feel that the military needs to do a better job of explaining what the

reporters call the "big picture" in Iraq. For instance, how do various incidents happening

in the country affect the military's overall operational plan? How do military operations

affect the U.S. and coalition's plans to bring about a stable and democratic Iraq? Overall,

the media seemed to want a better attempt on the military's part to contextualize

individual incidents that they report on within the larger scheme of military operations in

the country.

The second area of focus that emerged from this research is how military public

affairs staff and members of the media use technology and the Internet as

communications tools. Those interviewed here found technology critical to their ability

to do their jobs and share information, especially from geographically separated

locations, but some also felt that technology like e-mail sometimes prevents the one-on-

one personal contact that can be made over the telephone or through face-to-face

meetings.

The last area of focus that emerged involves the relationship between the military

and the media. While most of the interviewees feel that improvements have been made

in recent years to strengthen this relationship, nearly all feel more needs to be done to get

past the differences between the two sides, and to try to promote honest and open communication on all parts.

The first area which will be discussed is the MNF-I website itself. Then I will discuss findings on the use of technology and the Internet as communication tools. Finally, I will look at themes that emerged from interview participants' views on the military-media relationship.

The Website

The mission of the Multi-National Force – Iraq, as described by one of the military public affairs officials interviewed, is to secure the country and create the conditions for a free and democratic Iraq. However, that goal cannot be achieved through military operations alone. Public support for and perception of the military's efforts also play a critical role. As stated in the Department of Defense's guide for public affairs personnel, Joint Publication 3-61, *Public Affairs,* the media plays a very big part in how the public perceives any conflict:

Media coverage of potential future military operations can, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This is true for the US public, the public in allied countries, whose opinion can affect the durability of the coalition, and publics in countries where US conducts operations, whose perceptions of the US can affect the cost and duration of our involvement. The JFC (Joint Forces Commander) must organize for and facilitate access of national and international media to US forces, including those engaged in combat operations. (p. xii).

One of the tools which the MNF-I public affairs staff uses to help shape public perceptions of the Iraq conflict is its website, http://www.mnf-iraq.com/. According to Army Major Bradford Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), who serves as the current officer in charge of the MNF-I website, the purpose of the website is as follows:

> To inform people on what is going on over here [in Iraq] and what our mission is … it's a public outreach website. The overall goal is to inform the American public and Arabic audiences about the mission of MNF-I and what we're doing here and the good things we're doing here in country. (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007)

A brief overview of the website finds it organized into sections that feature news, facts and information on the country of Iraq, its leaders, Allied military leaders in the country, military force structure and organization, facts on insurgent groups in the country and their tactics, messages from and for the troops, information for the media, videos, commander's messages and transcripts from press conferences and briefing slides.

In addition to daily stories and feature stories that are located on the site's homepage, there is also a press release link, which has military press releases on incidents which happen in Iraq. The site also has a photo gallery, links to military videos on the video website YouTube, and an archive of press releases and international news stories from mainstream press such as *The New York Times,* and The Associated Press. The videos include a combat section, which features things like camera footage shot during

battles, footage from military surveillance aircraft such as the *Predator*, and cockpit footage from military aircraft engaging insurgent forces on the ground. In addition, there are videos featuring the building of schools and clinics, military members interaction with local Iraqi communities, training of Iraqi soldiers and more. Videos also include testimonials from Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines on why they serve.

It is also important to note that the site offers the majority of its content in Arabic as well as English. At the top of the homepage, there is a button written in Arabic, which when clicked, converts the site to the Arabic language. Not all content is mirrored, however, such as the "Messages for Troops," Link, which is designed specifically for people to leave messages of support for Coalition Troops, and the videos are not translated into Arabic, because, Leighton says, the MNF-I website staff does not have the manpower and equipment to do that translation at this time.

According to Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), the majority of content on the MNF-I website is pulled from other sources, such as the Department of Defense's Joint Combat Camera Center, which produces official video and photography for all the military services. The website also gathers information from other military news sites such as the Department of Defense homepage, the various service websites, and international news sources. This content has already gone through an approval process where a military public affairs officer or a member of their staff has reviewed content for operational security and approved the content for release. To better understand the MFN-I website, I took a closer look at the website using a textual analysis to try to understand its themes, messages and goals.

Figure 1: Multi-National Force – Iraq webpage, Oct. 8, 2007

Multi-National Force – Iraq – Home

file:///Users/Carla/Desktop/Multi-National%20Force%20-%20Iraq%20-%20Home.webarchive

Q▾ Google

GI Mail   Yahoo!   Gmail   SIUC Webmail   Military Ban...Bank Online   Gamcare Forum   My Alli   WinkFlash   Kodak Gallery   Capital One ...ices – Login

Language:English|العربية

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM
Official Website of Multi-National Force - Iraq

Language: English | العربية

search...   Search

Home   News   The New Face of Iraq   Inside the Force   Fight for Freedom   From the Troops   For the Troops   For the Media   Video   CG's Messages   Site Map

Samarra and Kirkuk: Strategic city update

Monday, 08 October 2007

COB SPEICHER — In the city of Samarra, Iraq, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has completed 40 of the 45 planned projects in the Iraq Reconstruction Program.

"We're joining the Iraqi people in reconstructing their country," said Col. Michael F. Pfenning, commander of the Corps' Gulf Region North district, or GRN. "We're executing construction and project management in a dynamic environment in terms of security, market capability, material delivery challenges, quality of workmanship, and immediate need of the Iraqi people."

As one of four strategic cities in Pfenning's seven-province, 66,000 square mile area of responsibility, Samarra is steadily making a comeback to its days as a trade center of the region. Although not a Reconstruction Program project, Iraqi media reported last week that reconstruction of the Shi'a-venerated al-Askariya shrine in Samarra will begin after Ramadan, funded by the European Union and the Government of Iraq. The shrine and mosque of the 10th and 11th Imams—Ali al-Hadi and Hassan al-Askari—were destroyed in a bomb explosion in February of last year.

With a population of approximately 200,000, Samarra lies on the east bank of the Tigris River, and was the capital of the Muslim world for 56 years in the 9th century. Today the ancient city benefits from upgrades to its electrical grid, and water and sewage projects, totaling more than $37 million—in both the Iraq Reconstruction Program and the Commander's Emergency Response Program.

• There are nine electrical projects budgeted for this city of 200,000, with eight of those completed and one still ongoing; with most of the homes and businesses receiving power at least 12 hours a day. This meets the goal at the time of Iraq's sovereignty in 2004 and the simultaneous start of the Iraq Reconstruction Program, which was to increase hours of power in Iraqi homes to an average of 12 hours of electricity daily.

• The city pumps river water to treatment facilities and then into the city via main water lines. It has no operating water department to maintain or repair the existing system, which is only 20 percent operational.

Read more...

Press Releases
- MNF-W forces attacked
- East Rashid mosque no longer al-Qaeda refuge
- MND-B forces bomb terrorist ambush sites, indirect fire points in East Rashid
- Doura residents evacuated for their protection

Feature Stories

Sha'ab residents stand up for security

BAGHDAD — Inside a stuffy conference room in a makeshift recruiting station, a dozen men from eastern Baghdad's Sha'ab neighborhood stood with their right hands raised.

The men were all different sizes and shapes, some in their teens, some with gray hair, some in oxford shirts and dress shoes, others in sports jerseys and flip-flops.

In front of each man was a piece of paper with a statement of loyalty to the Iraqi government. Haltingly at first and then louder as their voices joined together, the men recited the words on the paper, pledging to serve the government and obey the law.

Joint effort turns terrorist recruiting center into school

LUTIFIYAH — For American schoolchildren, libraries, restrooms and desks and chairs in the school are a given. For many Iraqi children, however, those elements of school life would be regarded as luxuries.

Thus, the exuberant celebration surrounding the re-opening of the Jolen School, reclaimed from terrorists who had overtaken the building.

"This school was once used as an al Qaida recruiting facility," explained U.S. Army 1st Lt. Aaron Hall, civil affairs officer, 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), Military Transition Team. "I remember when this building was covered with graffiti."

Tongan Marines take over palace security

BAGHDAD — The Kingdom of Tonga's contingent of Marines accepted duties to provide palace security during a recent assumption of responsibility ceremony here.

Before assuming their duties, the Tongan Marines were at Camp Pendleton, Calif. with U.S. Marines, where they received pre-deployment training and refresher courses on tactical procedures.

After their training in California, the Tongans went to Kuwait to receive additional military training.

International News
- U.S. must keep pressure on al Qaeda in Iraq – Petraeus (Reuters)
- Combat aviation brigade created in Iraq (Stars&Stripes)
- U.S., Iraq to probe firefight involving Blackwater

This Week In Iraq::

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Messages For the Troops ::

PV2 AARON GRIMES, WE LOVE AND MISS YOU AND ARE PRAYING FOR ALL OF YOU EVERY DAY. GOD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU SAFE, CALL WHEN YOU CAN. LOVE YOU, DAD AND SUE
nickey grimes, midland, tx usa

... keeping you all close in prayer. Our hearts are with you; we support you and your mission. Thank you! In such troubling times, you give us hope for the future. Your strength helps us to be strong. May God bless you all in a very special way. You are absolutely, positivel ...more

Send your Message to the Troops

Interactive Iraq :: Press Briefings

Maj. Gen. Kevin Bergner and Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh, Oct. 3

Maj. Gen. Kevin Bergner, Multi-National Force - Iraq spokesman, and Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh, commanding general of Gulf Region Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, provide an update on operations and reconstruction in Iraq, Oct. 3, 2007.

📄 View Transcript
📄 View Slides
🎞️ VIDEO Watch Press Conference

Read Articles: Operational , Reconstruction

Interactive Iraq :: Pentagon Press Briefings

Col. Michael Kershaw, Oct. 5

Col. Michael Kershaw, commander, 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, provided an update on ongoing security operations in Iraq, Oct. 5, 2007.

🎞️ VIDEO Watch Press Conference
📄 Read Story
📄 Transcript

Interactive Iraq :: Iraq Freedom Minute

Iraqi Freedom Minute, Oct. 4

•Soldiers work daily to improve quality of life for the residents of Baghdad with special projects, including efforts to supply neighborhoods with reliable power.

A textual analysis

A limited textual analysis of the MNF-I website reveals a few noteworthy themes. The first is an attempt to focus on good news stories happening in country. Because the homepages are not archived for review, I used a convenience sample of days for analysis – Sept. 24, 2007, and Oct. 8, 2007, and also looked at the news stories archived from Sept. 3, 2007, to Oct. 12, 2007, because those were the only dates archived on the website. In addition, I also did a Lexis-Nexis search to compare the kinds of stories that were being reported in the mainstream press for the same days. In looking at the MNF-I home page on both days, a trend of positive news emerged. On Sept. 24, the headlines included "Violent incidents down: Al Qaeda 'off balance' in Iraq spokesman says," "Joint efforts putting Baghdad International Airport back on radar," "Basrah Railroad Station provides transportation services," and "329th Chemical Company executes cleanup missions." Each story highlighted efforts by the military to either improve security or help improve the country of Iraq.

A similar focus was found on the homepage for Oct. 8. Headlines for this day included "Samarra and Kirkuk: Strategic city update," which focused on Army Corps of Engineers' reconstruction projects completed in the region, "Sha'ab residents stand up for security," "Joint effort turns terrorist recruiting center into school," and "Tongan Marines take over palace security." A search of the news stories archive found stories focused on progress made in the country rather than security incidents or other negative news. There were, however, brief press releases on the website's press release link that addressed some of the security incidents happening in Iraq

In contrast, mainstream media for the same day featured stories on problems with

the U.S. security firm, Blackwater, which had been tied to the deaths of Iraqi civilians ("Blackwater," 2007), the weekend death of a U.S. soldier in a roadside bomb attack in Baghdad, the discovery of 10 unidentified bodies shot execution style in Baghdad, and the attempted murder of the Iraqi minister of education ("War," 2007). In a Lexis-Nexis search of mainstream media search of stories for Oct. 8, stories included information on bombings which killed at least nine Iraqis in three separate attacks the previous day, one of which occurred near the Iranian embassy in Iraq.

In addition to positive news stories prominently displayed on the MNF-I home page, another feature on the home page was a photo gallery section, which on both days showed members of the military interacting with local civilians, flying missions, or performing security patrols. Each photo seemed to convey a message that the troops' presence in Iraq was beneficial. On Sept. 24, one of the photos featured in the photo gallery for the day was called "Freedom," and it depicted joyous Iraqi children waving their country's flag. On Oct. 8, photos in the gallery depicted soldiers performing security sweeps, road patrols and meeting with a new commander. A search of the entire photo gallery of more than 50 photos found that the majority of the photos either depicted soldiers in action or interacting in a positive manner with the people and soldiers of Iraq.

Another dominant theme on the MNF-I webpage is the word "Freedom." In bold letters at the top of the page are the words, "Operation Iraqi Freedom, Official Website of Multi-National Force – Iraq." In addition to the title words, slogans like "Fight for Freedom," "Iraqi Freedom Minute," "Freedom Journal Iraq" and "Freedom Facts" jump from the page. These symbols function to frame the conflict in a positive light, showing the war as something that will ultimately bring freedom to the country of Iraq.

Figure 2: Photos from the MNF- I Photo Gallery, Retrieved Oct. 12, 2007

Security Assessment

U.S. Army Sgt. Justin Silverthorn, from Charlie Company, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, from Ft. Lewis, Wash., takes a break to pet a stray dog at a U.S. and Iraqi Army security checkpoint in Tarmiyah, Iraq, Sept. 25, 2007. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication 2nd Class Summer M. Anderson.

A Helping Hand

U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Jessica Gallaway, deployed from Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D., assigned to the 732nd Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron, Detachment 4, holds an Iraqi girl's hand as they wait to return her to her apartment after a fire. Air Force Security Forces are the first responders for the International Zone, Baghdad. Photo by Staff Sgt. Markus Maier, U.S. Central Command Air Forces.
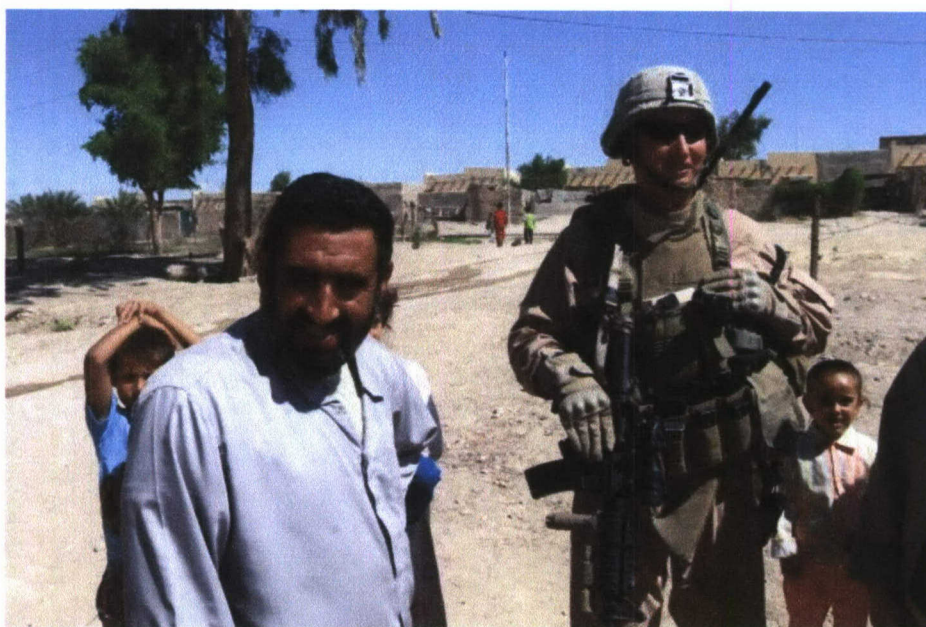
Mayor and Commandor

U.S. Marine Corps Capt. James H. Brady, commanding officer, Kilo Battery, 1st Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, meets with the local the mayor of Kabani, Iraq, while on a security patrol Sept. 28, 2007. U.S. Marine Corps photo taken by Lance Cpl. Robert S. Morgan.

Date: 14/10/2007
Size: 640x427
Full size: 2000x1333

As far as information for the media, the MNF-I home page has links to daily press releases which discuss incidents like roadside bombings and other security incidents, the news stories of the day, transcripts from press conferences, quotes from military leadership and slides from briefings. However, the only section devoted specifically to the media deals more with the process for credentialing and the process for becoming an embed with the military than it does with offering newsworthy information.

The three links under the title "For the Media" give reporters very detailed and specific information on how to apply for media credentials, how to apply for an embed position, and how to contact the media embed team for more information on becoming embedded reporters. This seems to indicate that the military places more emphasis on the actual "process" of enabling media to work with the military than on providing them overall information on the war itself. The media's desire for more "big picture" information will be discussed later in this chapters.

The focus of the MNF-I website appears to be building support for the military efforts in Iraq, and conveying positive news about what is happening in the country. However, to understand the military's exact goals for the website, interviews were conducted with the officer in charge, and the non-commissioned officer in charge of the website.

The Military's Goals for the Website

In addition to serving as a conduit of information to the public, Major Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), who oversees the website, said that it is designed to be a resource and research tool that media can use to find information, such

as transcripts from press conferences, slides from briefings, story teasers, video clips and press releases. It is designed to be a one-stop-shop for information on MNF-I.

The public affairs staff's non-commissioned officer in charge of overseeing the website, Army Sergeant Donald Veitch said that the website also attempts to counter some of what the military feels is a constant stream of bad-news stories being run in the mainstream press. He said:

> The main goal is to keep putting out the [military's] message so that people still have the opportunity to hear it, regardless of what the national news deems is the news. There's a lot of stuff going on here that people don't have the opportunity to hear about, and the [MNF-I] Combined Press Information Center's goal is to get that stuff out (D. Veitch, personal interview, Sept. 19, 2007).

Veitch (D. Veitch, personal interview, Sept. 19, 2007), added that part of the way the Combined Press Information Center gets the word out is through things like stories of the day, individual accounts of valor, links to international news stories from sources like AP, Reuters, the New York Times, etc., and messages for the troops.

Veitch feels that it is not only a place for civilians back in the United States to get information, but it is also a conduit for people stationed in Iraq to be able to go on the website and find out what's going on in the country. He added:

> They get a sense of what happens in different provinces .... Anyone around the world that's interested in what's happening here in Iraq is the target audience. Whether they dislike the war immensely or they're supportive of what we're doing here, everyone has an interest, and by coming to our website, they can get a

chance to see everything from the big picture down to what an infantry squad goes through during the day (D. Veitch, personal interview, Sept. 19, 2007).

According to Major Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), a lot of the time spent by the contractor who puts the site together is focused on transcribing press conferences and archiving them, as well as translating the English content into Arabic for the Arabic side of the website. He added that a major focus of the website staff right now is getting information out in a timely manner and making sure content is updated regularly. Leighton said,

> The power of the web is to get things out there immediately, and if people go to your website and you don't have fresh content on it, they're not going to come back. So, we've fixed most of those problems, but that was the big thing about maintaining the website. You always want to give the people who visit your website a fresh look - something new every time (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

As far as fresh content, Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), has some future goals for the website. One feature he would like to see is a better link for the soldiers to reach the American public. In his words, he sees it as kind of a "citizen journalist" role, where soldiers would have a way to communicate to the people back home what they are going through and what they see during their tours of duty in Iraq. In addition, the website staff is looking into adding the ability to pod cast some of the video content currently available on the website, meaning that digital video files

could be downloaded onto portable digital music and video players such as the iPod or similar formats, as well as personal computers. Pod casts can be subscribed to, so they automatically download without the user having to go and search for them.

While the public affairs staff in charge of the Multi-National Force – Iraq website has a number of goals for the future, there are also issues and problems that they feel need to be solved in the immediate future. The first is finding a better way to get information approved for release more quickly, because currently, each press release put out by the military has to be reviewed and approved by the commander of the unit who is putting out the release. During his interview, Leighton stressed timeliness of information as a critical issue.

> One of the things we have to get better about is being more quick, we have to get that information on there quicker. I think we're doing OK now, but of course the media needs things "now," they need it right away to meet their deadline, and we have an approval process that we have to go through to actually get that stuff approved to go out to the public and therefore approved to go up on the website. And that's a challenge. It's a challenge expediting our release of information (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), feels he has a good idea of what the media needs because in the civilian world he had been a newspaper editor for the past 12 years before his National Guard unit was called to active-duty approximately two years ago. He stressed that newspaper reporters need information quickly enough that they can put it together, write the story, have it edited and put out.

He also argues that the government must work harder to expedite their approval process, because delays only hurt the military.

In addition to timeliness, accuracy is another focus for military public affairs officers. Leighton said,

> I don't think the insurgents have the same sort of review process that we do, but they also don't have the same sort of commitment to the truth, so we have to make sure everything is true before we send it out, which is a good thing, but sometimes it hurts us because if we can't get the information confirmed in a timely manner, then sometimes the insurgents will put out their word first, and of course the word that goes out first is the part that sticks with people. You run the danger of misinformation getting out there before you can get the right information out there (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

Another issue the public affairs staff is working on is a better marketing plan for the website, because as Veitch, who helps oversee the website put it, "if people don't know it's there, it can't help them" (D. Veitch, personal interview, Sept. 19, 2007). The marketing plan for the website includes updating keywords and optimizing search engine listings, e-mailing stories of the day and a "This Week in Iraq" newsletter, and producing a media guide to MNF-Iraq.com outlining all the content to be presented to every embedded reporter that comes through the Combined Press Information Center.

While the military is putting forth a concerted effort to market the website, will it be effective if members of the public and the media do not find the information useful? As of now, the MNF-I staff does not have any mechanism or group in place to gather

feedback from the public and media members as far as their opinions about the website or what they do or do not find useful. While Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007), said there is a daily report that comes down to show how many people visit the website, the Combined Press Information Center staff does not have the resources or personnel in place to do formal surveys at this time. In order to assess what the media are looking for on the website, I conducted interviews with members of the media to gain their thoughts about the MNF-I website.

The Media's Needs

For the purposes of this study, I interviewed four members of the media, each from newspapers ranking in the top six print news outlets in the United States in terms of circulation according to the Audit Bureau Circulation (Top, 2007), a non-profit association of magazine and newspaper publishers, advertisers and advertising agencies. Interviewees included Hugh Dellios, foreign editor from *The Chicago Tribune*, who has been at the newspaper for more than 20 years, and has covered conflicts in Kosovo, Palestine, Jerusalem, and during the first Gulf War, covered U.S. Central Command in Qatar.

Other participants were Rick Jervis, a journalist with more than 11 years of experience in the field, who was a Baghdad Correspondent for three years and is the current Gulf Coast Correspondent for *USA TODAY;* Jim Michaels, a military writer for *USA TODAY* who has been a journalist for more than 25 years; and a military reporter from the *Washington Post,* who has worked at the newspaper for nearly 10 years, and wished only to be identified by his title. An additional correspondent from *The Chicago*

Tribune added insight on his experiences with military public affairs during the first Gulf War.

The most predominant theme which emerged from the interview data was that while the correspondents found some information on the website helpful, for the most part the correspondents who used the website found the majority of the information to be less than useful to them in providing broad "big picture" information on what is really happening in Iraq. In fact, when asked what resources the reporters used most for gathering information on the war, not one person interviewed listed the website as a top resource, as the following comments illustrate:

I personally don't rely on the Internet generally as a source of a lot of information (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

There's no substitute for being on the ground and looking at things and talking to people – you can't ever substitute that, obviously .... I call and interview people all the time to get data, request data maybe through a Freedom of Information Act request ... calling around and building a story (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007).

A lot of my resources were U.S. military officials, whether that's a spokesman or the head of a unit, or the head of different departments. Iraqi politicians were also sources and I would call them and they would give me information (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

We talk to commanders in the field, and officers in the field, and enlisted soldiers, Marines who are actually on the ground – people we've met to just try and figure out where they are, what they're doing, sort of how things are (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

I think a lot of my interaction with the military was much more with phone calls and press conferences (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

When you cover a war, you need to get into the villages where some of the conflict is taking place ... you want witnesses who can tell you what they saw from each side or what they saw happen on the ground (H. Dellios, personal interview, Sept. 26, 2007).

For all the correspondents interviewed for this paper, interaction with people, either on the ground or those in leadership positions, serves as their primary source for information. However, there were a few things on the MNF-I website that the correspondents who used it found useful. The first were the transcripts of press conferences held at the MNF-I Headquarters, as illustrated by the following comments:

Now, some of it is a gateway to official sources that we're aware of, transcripts and things like that ... whether it's a press conference, or a speech, or a statement, and they archive it, so you can literally go back and pull up a press conference that you attended weeks ago, that you remembered, 'hey, there's a particular thing that I was interested in that didn't really hit me at the time, but now I remember

Secretary Gates said something about that,' you can, in moments, go back and pull up the transcript (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

They had transcripts of all the press conferences there, and I would use that a lot. I would go to the MNF-I website and go straight to the transcript of a press conference of General Caldwell or somebody else and that was actually pretty helpful (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

In addition to transcripts, Jervis (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007), a former Baghdad Correspondent for *USA TODAY*, also mentioned that he found organizational charts useful which explained the structure of the Multi-National Force – Iraq and its subunits – who was in charge of what. He said, "it really sort of helped me sort through you know, the structure … to visualize who's in charge of Baghdad, who was in charge of Mosul, who was in charge of the South, and the different departments and different leaders."

Michaels (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007), who has been a military writer at *USA TODAY* for more than five years, had a lot of praise for the military's Digital Video Imaging Distribution System, or DVIDS, from which the MNF-I webmaster pulls a lot of the video content on their site. According to its mission statement on http://www.dvidshub.net/index.php, "DVIDS is a state-of-the-art, 24/7 operation that provides a timely, accurate and reliable connection between the media around the world and the military serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar and

Bahrain. Through a network of portable Ku-band satellite transmitters located in-theater and a distribution hub in Atlanta, Georgia, DVIDS makes available real-time broadcast-quality video, still images and print products as well as immediate interview opportunities with service members, commanders and subject matter experts." Michaels (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007), said he uses the DVIDS system not only for video content, but also to set up live interviews with commanders and other leadership in Iraq via video-teleconference.

While these particular features of the website were considered useful, one area that the correspondents interviewed unanimously agreed was not very useful to them were the press releases provided by the Combined Press Information Center and posted on the MNF-I website. All interviewees felt that the press releases lacked detailed information, did not provide proper context or, as *Chicago Tribune* foreign editor Hugh Dellios put it, tried too hard to paint a rosy picture of what was happening in Iraq "that didn't always match with what we saw was going on there" (H. Dellios, personal interview, Sept. 26, 2007).

One issue which the reporters seemed to have a problem with was their feeling that the majority of press releases put out by the military seemed to focus only on positive things happening in Iraq, or on isolated incidents, as noted by the following comments:

> They had a lot of press releases there, as far as schools being rebuilt, and different kind of stories, most of them were considered positive stories, which are fine, and I basically understand that that's their duty to try to get those stories out as well, but I would have liked to have seen ... something that was a little harder news than just schools reopening .... (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

A lot of the problem with this stuff is, you know, we're in an information war, and I get these tons of press releases from the military, and they're not really that usable ... there's no effort to weave in a broader picture ... present the information there in a comprehensive way, as opposed to 'we got two al-Quaida militants yesterday.' I mean, you know, it's not helpful (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007).

Speaking honestly, I think a lot of the press releases leave a lot to be desired. There's not a lot of information (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

The military affairs reporter interviewed from the *Washington Post* (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007), gave examples of press releases from the military that he believed either failed to paint a broader picture, or, he felt, gave outright false information. The first was the military press release dealing with the allegations of detainee abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The reporter said that the military's press release simply stated that the military was investigating allegations of detainee abuse, and that further information would be released. The reporter said that little other information was released until months later, when there was an uproar in the media after photographs were leaked showing the extent of the prisoner abuse. He commented,

I would argue, and of course I'm coming from the journalism side of things, but I would argue that had they been a little more forthcoming in the outset in January

… had they put out more information at the time and been a little bit more straightforward about what we were talking about, they probably would have avoided all of the shock that the world felt when the photographs got out there (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

Another example given by the *Washington Post* reporter was the friendly-fire incident involving former professional football player Pat Tillman, who left a professional football career to enlist in the Army following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001. Tillman was killed in Afghanistan in 2002, in an incident that was initially reported as hostile fire, but it was later revealed that Tillman's death had been the result of friendly fire. The *Washington Post* reporter commented on the initial releases put out by the military:

Not only was it not very much information, but it was actually incorrect information, that again, I don't know who to blame for the actual incorrect information being put out publicly, but based on how things have gone, how the investigations have gone, and some of Congressional inquiries gone into that issue, it's clear that people pretty much all the way up and down the chain of command knew that the information that was being put out publicly was incorrect. And that is a whole different issue. I mean, ostensibly you're lying, which is offensive to people like me, but the reality is in the end, you're going to find out what happened. And I think it disserves everyone, and it probably disserves the military even more than the public (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

Rather than incomplete press releases on a website that don't give reporters what they need to do their jobs, the correspondents' interviewed would like to see more of an effort on the military's part to post information on the site that would help explain the bigger picture of the war, or at times, just basic data about the war in Iraq, as illustrated by their comments:

> Something which we are constantly struggling with trying to get somebody high enough who could give a big picture. Very rarely does the military offer us either a press conference with someone ... or through their website or something offer us the big picture (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

> As far as the website goes ... what reporters want is information, maybe casual information, maybe information on roadside bombs ... how many tribes have signed on to support local reconciliation initiative. Think about what makes news stories and then write them (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007).

> The things that we're often looking for are data. How many U.S. troops are in Iraq currently? How many foreign troops are in Iraq currently? What's the breakout, where are they? You know, to the extent that security allows discussion of that. What are the current operations, you know, the name of the public operation. If there were easy access, like at the top of the website, there was an "Iraq data" link that gave you essentially what I just said, that would ... be very helpful (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

Overall, the consensus of the reporters interviewed was that while they appreciate the military's efforts to make things like transcripts, slides, fact sheets and stories easily accessible through the MNF-I website, the majority feel that the public affairs staff needs to make more of an effort to interpret the "big picture" in Iraq and put stories and information on the website that adds to the media's understanding of that context.

Technology as a communication Tool

Previous research on the subject of technology as a communications tool found those who used it were split between finding it helpful, and finding that technology such as e-mail and websites added to their workload. In addition, many participants in previous studies did not see the Web as a replacement for other traditional means of distributing information. I found this to be the case as well. While human interaction is still the preferred method of communication for most members of the media and public affairs staff interviewed, both groups seem to feel that technology makes their jobs easier.

Both members of the military interviewed felt that technology made them more effective at their jobs by saving time and giving them news tools to spread their messages, as evidenced by the following comments:

It's very dynamic. It's very powerful if you can get people to your site.... It's very interactive as well, so you can really engage your audience, or your viewers, if done right (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

It's given me another avenue to get the word out to inform people. It's no longer just press releases. We can put the press releases up there, we can also put the

transcripts, we can also put the slides, we can get a lot more products out there in a place that's accessible to the media should they need it. And also, we have an archive that's online. So that, for instance, if the media wants to look up a press release .... [or] transcript from a couple months ago and see exactly what the general said, they can do that (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

It's also saved a lot of time for the media and for myself, because I don't have to dig up a press release every time the media wants to see a press release that they somehow circular filed from a couple months ago. Or, they don't even have to call anymore, if they know the website's there, they can just go to the press releases and look it up themselves (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

Veitch said he has embraced every technological change that has come down, because he feels it is a better way in which to get messages out, especially to a younger audience who has embraced tools like the YouTube video site and e-mail. He said:

A lot of the younger people in the United States need to understand what happens here.... This is a way for us to reach them in particular and let them know that a lot of good things happen – hospitals do open, we open clinics, new schools that they don't hear about on the news (D. Veitch, personal interview, Sept. 19, 2007).

In addition to making their jobs more effective, technology like e-mail allows the military to communicate with media back in their home countries, as well as keep a

record of all media queries that come in. Leighton (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007) said that often times, the Combined Press Information Center's staff will get a phone call from a member of the media with a query, and the press desk staff will ask the media to put their question in an e-mail and send it.

Leighton added, "the reason for this is that it helps us keep better track of it, and where it's going, and makes sure we meet the media's needs. So, it gives us a written record …" (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007). This can be particularly important, Leighton added, when a big incident is happening in Iraq and the press desk is being bombarded with media queries. However, neither Leighton nor Veitch felt like the use of e-mail and Internet technology decreased their one-on-one interaction with the media. They said:

> Personally myself, I love the technology and anything that helps me get my job done quicker, because there's a lot of work that needs to be done, is a blessing. I still have a lot of day-to day interaction with real-life humans, so I'm not concerned about technology taking over and distancing me from the people I work with on a day-to-day basis (D. Veitch, personal interview, Sept. 19, 2007). Here in this office, we still do a lot of one-on-one communication with the media. In fact, people call our press desk phones all night and all day. So, we're here anytime the media wants to give us a call, they can talk to a real person. [Technology] doesn't stop us from picking up the phone and giving them a quote if we have to (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

The majority of the media members interviewed also saw technology as beneficial to their jobs, especially with the time difference and distance from the military fronts in Iraq. E-mail allowed them to send messages to their military contacts at any time, and allowed communication with those stationed in areas with only military Defense Switching Network telephone access, which civilians do not have access to. They said:

[E-mail] is vital when you're trying to get ahold of a [Public Affairs Officer] up in Kirkuk, or in Scandoria, when you just can't reach those places ... if we were going to get any decent information from some of these military bases outside of Baghdad, we really relied on e-mail contact (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

It provides really a seamless communication. Technology has made our lives easier. Allowed for the information to get back and forth a lot easier. You can imagine what it was like before we had all that, so it's been very helpful, and I assume it's helping public affairs folks as well.... I can e-mail, "hey can you put me in touch with the expert on XYZ subject, here are some of the questions I'm looking to get answered, here's the data I'd like in advance..." so, that's made life a lot easier, and frankly allowed me to do a lot of reporting from here (Washington, D.C.), as well as there (Iraq) (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007).

The good [of technology] is that at any hour of any day from any terminal anywhere in the world you can pretty much get access to the same information

that you might have otherwise needed to make a phone call and rely on someone

being on the other end who knows what they're talking about to give it to you

(*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

[Technology] has a huge upside to it. It facilitates instantaneous communication

when we're talking different parts of the globe, different hours of the day,

sometimes I think, Baghdad is eight hours head of us here, so I can be in touch

with my Baghdad correspondents quickly, they can be in touch with their military

sources quickly, and if it's talking to someone in Washington at the Pentagon or

something like that and you can't get to them, you leave them an e-mail address

and they're back to you as soon as you wake up in the morning. Electronic media

is a huge help (H. Dellios, personal interview, Sept. 26, 2007).

Interestingly, while the majority of those interviewed felt like technology

enhanced their ability to do their jobs, some did see a downside to the reliance on e-mails

and websites to communicate information.

The downside is that some people rely on it too much, and maybe don't develop

the personal relationship they would if they were actually talking on the telephone

or having to meet up and look at each other face-to-face. But, I don't think it's

just the media and the military that face that problem with digital communications

(H. Dellios, personal interview, Sept. 26, 2007).

I think that [technology] has created a culture where e-mail is the preferred method to communicate. Where, it seems to me like there are a lot of public affairs, commanders, etc., who want you to e-mail because it's a record of the conversation. They have every question you asked, when you asked it, the way in which you've asked it, and they have it forever, and they can forward it to everyone they want (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

I think the personal element gets a little bit lost because we're e-mailing so much. And, there's some people who I deal with personally on the phone all the time, and our personal relationships make all the difference. Often times, instead of sending me to the website, they'll just send me what I need (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

In analyzing the comments from both military and media members, the consensus seems to be that technology is beneficial as a communications tool and helps people do their jobs more effectively, as long as they do not let it replace the one-on-one communication between them. Communication, or lack thereof, has played a critical role in the successes and problems in the military-media relationship over time. For this study, the interviewees offered some of their insights into how that relationship stands today.

The Military-Media relationship

A former public affairs commander of mine once said that just how one tends to view the relationship between the military and the media generally depends on which side you work for. The quote below, taken from the Department of Defense's Joint Publication 3-61, *Public Affairs,* illustrates the military's idea of why friction exists between the two.

> All members of our military forces have taken an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. During our nation's history, there has been tension between the military and the media over the public's right to know. The military's operational mission requires that operations security be practiced at all levels of command to protect the lives of American, allied, and coalition forces, and the security of ongoing or future operations. Though responsible members of the media share these concerns, their job is to report on military operations in real time. These competing goals sometimes lead to friction between the media and the military (p. vii).

While literature has shown that the military has made more of an effort in recent years to be more open with the press, my research found that there are still tensions between the media and the military. Leighton, who oversees the MNF-I website and also works at the MNF-I's Combined Press Information Center said:

> I think that there is distrust on both ends. Most military officers are ultra-sensitive about what appears in the press. They covet control, which is vitally important in military operations. But, you can't control the press – just influence it the best you

can. And the only way you can influence the press is to be as honest and upfront as possible without violating operational security. I don't know if most military officers understand that. Of course, not every media member is perfect either. There are some who don't even try to be objective and will try to slant things, but, I think most media members try to get their information right and try to be objective (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

Even feeling that the military needs to be open and honest with the press, there still seems to be a feeling among military members that the media do not make an effort to cover positive things happening in Iraq. However, the military officials interviewed for this paper did seem to understand the reasons behind the media's coverage, as evidenced by Leighton's comment:

Sure, I'd like to see more context – more stories about schools and medical clinics opening, and reconstruction projects being completed, etc., but I know that's not the nature of the news. If I was here as a reporter, I'd be covering the death and destruction first, too. That said, there have been some positive stories out there, too. Not enough to give people all the context they need, but the media is a business, and explosions and death sell. Often, the problem is that the media only have one side of the story to report because the military was not fast enough to get the other side to them before their deadline. The media won't hold a story to wait for us. They are in a competitive business – and it is a business. That's why they will always go for the bombing over the school renovation. Our job is to help them report both (B. Leighton, personal interview, Sept. 11, 2007).

On the media side, the general feeling is that the military is not always completely truthful when providing information to the media. Several reporters commented on this:

I think there's sort of an ample amount of suspicion, I guess, on both sides…. The thing the media tends to think – and a lot of times this actually turns out to be true, is not that we're being lied to, is not that we're getting bad information, it's just that it's just sometimes incomplete information, it's not the whole story. There's always a sense of what the military tells you at a press conference in Baghdad may just be part of the story, and you have to dig in, make a couple more phone calls, to sort of get the whole thing (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

We had a suspicion that because [the military] was offering the embed positions, that they thought maybe they could be less forthcoming in the bigger briefings… we didn't want to just run stories every day about the obvious heroics of the soldiers on the ground, so there was a little bit of tension at CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command) over our frustrations that the military was not forthcoming on the ground there. I think some of those problems and suspicions continued after the American occupation of Iraq… there were continuing concerns about lack of information and again, rosy scenarios painted by the military on the ground there (H. Dellios, personal interview, Sept. 26, 2007).

I think … the "go ugly early" would serve everyone much better, because all we're really after is what happened. If you try to hide the ball, we're going to find it, and

usually when we find it after you've tried to hide it, it's going to be uglier. They always say it's the cover-up that kills you. I've found that generally speaking, that when we're dealing with something, and people just say, "alright, this isn't good, but here's what we've done in the wake of discovering it," that works a lot better than, "oh, it's really not as bad as you think" (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

While three of the reporters felt the military bore a lot of the responsibility for getting truthful and accurate information out to the media, *USA TODAY'S* Michaels (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007), felt that the media share at least some of the blame for the tensions over how the war is covered in the press. He said:

We need to explain what's going on to the American public in terms of who's winning, who's losing, understanding strategy, understanding tactics, and that sort of thing. The press in general is not doing a very good job of that. We tend to focus on, you know, the daily bombings or something like that, or daily casualty counts, without actually looking behind the numbers and explaining things to the American public. It's not just a case of good news versus bad news, it's a question of depth of understanding. It's an environment that's unlike, obviously, a conventional war. In a conventional war, you can say, "we've gained this territory, or we've lost this territory." With a counterinsurgency, it's a little more difficult, and the public's not educated about it, so it's a tough job, and as a whole, we're not doing a very good job about [educating them] (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007).

One thing that all the media members interviewed agreed on was that military public affairs staff are making definite improvements, both to the MNF-I website, and in the relationship that they have with the media. In terms of the website, the reporter interviewed from the *Washington Post* cited improvements in the amount of information available and the easy access to data over recent months. "It's gotten much better ... there's a lot more on there than there was even a couple of months ago," he said.

The overall consensus from the reporters interviewed was that the government as a whole, especially since the current Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, took office, has made strides to warm the sometimes-tepid relationship shared by the media and the armed forces by being more open with their information, working to get information out more quickly, and by building relationships and trust with reporters who regularly cover the military.

> Things actually have improved. I felt it improved roughly around the time that Secretary [of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld left office. It was literally a palpable change. People actually felt it. [Military members] told us back in Baghdad ... that they suddenly felt like they could talk to us now, that they could do their job. It seemed like as soon as [Secretary of Defense Robert] Gates took office, that there was a feeling that the press wasn't the enemy, and that they were actually able to fulfill some of our requests (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

> I want to say that my correspondents have had very good relationships with PAOs (public affairs officers) and PIOs (public information officers) on the ground and trust many of them – but it tends to be the ones who are more forthcoming and

acknowledge the whole gamut of what's going on there, the good and the bad, and they build up credibility, and then, I think, the reporters and the officers have a much better relationship (H. Dellios, personal interview, Sept. 26, 2007).

I'll say this about the [military-media] relationship. Having started under the Donald Rumsfeld Pentagon, the Donald Rumsfeld model of dealing with the media, I think that the Robert Gates version of it is a little bit better – a little bit more open. Generally speaking, I think things have been very good. The embedding program I think works very well. And, really, I think most public affairs officers understand what we're up to and understand that we're interested in all sides and want to get it all out there. We just want people to understand the issue (*Washington Post* military writer, personal interview, Sept. 25, 2007).

We're in an information war. That doesn't mean, OK, propaganda versus propaganda, but it means quick information. I think actually the military's getting a lot better at it over there. It's not always the case maybe at the Pentagon or something like that, but you know, I find over there [in Iraq] they really react pretty quickly now, and they try to get access pretty quickly for the most part – and that's critical today when we're really in an information war (J. Michaels, personal interview, Sept. 24, 2007).

Summary

There is little doubt that Internet and e-mail technology has improved the way both

the military and the media do their jobs. In addition, while all those interviewed rely on technology to make their jobs easier, the reporters interviewed felt that the military tended to rely on it too often by bombarding reporters with e-mails and press releases, while the reporters wanted more one-on-one interaction with public affairs staff.

In terms of the website, the Multi-National Force – Iraq website seems to be a tool which can benefit both sides by providing timely and accurate information. However, the media participants in this study seemed to feel that there still quite a bit of room for improvement in terms of the overall picture provided about the war in Iraq, and whether or not the military could do more to improve the quality of the information provided.

This study also found a disconnect between what information the military is providing, and what media members want and need to do their job. The military is using the website to provide facts, briefings, photos and good news stories, and while the media members interviewed for this study found some of it useful, they all shared the opinion that more effort needs to be made on the military's side to include more information which helps describe the "big picture" in Iraq, and to weave the stories on the site into that overall context of how the smaller incidents that the military reports fit into the large military plan in Iraq.

And, finally, while all sides seemed to feel that improvements were being made in the military-media relationship, more effort is needed in both camps to overcome years of distrust between them. The media members interviewed here felt that building personal relationships with reporters was the key way for public affairs officers to improve their trust and credibility with the media in the future.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In order for a website to be successful, those who put it together need to have some idea of what their audience is looking for, and make efforts to put information on the site that its users find helpful. While the staff at the Multi-National Force – Iraq's (MNF-I) Combined Press Information Center have years of experience working with the media, and have some understanding of what members of the media need to do their jobs, there is no formal mechanism in place to gather feedback on the MNF-I website, or to evaluate how useful it is to both the public and the media.

Perceptions of the Website

Military members interviewed for this study seemed to feel that the MNF-I website offered a wide variety of information, both to the public and the media. Words like "conduit for information," "research tool" "public outreach," and "media resource" were used to describe the website. The military public affairs staff focuses on posting positive stories, fact sheets, transcripts of press conferences, briefing slides and other factual information, as well as photos and video which promote military efforts in the country. While both military members interviewed agreed that there are still improvements that need to be made to the website, they also felt that it has improved in recent months.

What the media participants in this study seem to be looking for is more hard news and information that helps them interpret the "big picture" in Iraq so that they can explain how military operations are going, how the military is going to go about bringing

stability to the country, and how smaller incidents fit in to how the overall operation is going to the public in a comprehensive way.

Media members did use the website when searching for basic factual information and transcripts, but those interviewed found the positive stories and press releases on the site to be of little use in interpreting what is really happening in Iraq. Access to public affairs contacts is another area of concern for the media. One reporter interviewed specifically mentioned that there is no comprehensive contact list for public affairs officials in country, so he often has a difficult time knowing who to contact for information.

Overall, the public affairs staff and the media members interviewed for this study seemed to have differing opinions on what information is useful and necessary in order to tell the story of military operations in Iraq.

As far as the military's goals for the website, things such as being a research tool for the media, serving as a conduit of information for the public and offering positive stories about what is happening in Iraq are accomplished by the website. It does provide facts, transcripts, briefing slides, photos, videos and other resources for both the media and the public to use.

However, the military's goal of providing timely and accurate information that supports the media's needs is not always served by the website, as evidenced by the media members' comments about wanting more current facts and figures on troops in Iraq, and their feeling that the military and the website does not offer a completely accurate and comprehensive picture of what is truly happening in the war.

Technology as a Communications Tool

Previous research has shown that the Web and e-mail technology is a valuable addition to the professional toolbox of public relations and other communicators. This study supports the idea that technology lessens the workload of public affairs staff and media members by allowing them quick access to information, near –instantaneous communication and global reach. It has also shown that technology plays a significant role in how the military and media members communicate with each other. Whether it is e-mails, cellular or satellite telephones or websites, technology allows the military and media members to bridge the distance and time difference between the U.S. and Iraq, and provides for an easy exchange of information.

However, all interviewees in this study stressed the importance of maintaining relationships and one-on-one communication. One reporter said, "what [the military] needs to be doing more of is personal one-on-one phone calls and contact, and really trying to establish personal relationships with the correspondents, because that's how … the flow of information occurs is by building personal relationships" (R. Jervis, personal interview, Sept. 25 2007).

The Military-Media Relationship

As far as the military-media relationship is concerned, this study found that things have improved somewhat since the first Gulf War, at least in the minds of the media members interviewed here. Although they acknowledged that they would all like to see more honest and open communication with the military, all the reporters interviewed

seemed to feel that the military has made an effort in recent years to at least attempt to provide as much access and information as military operational security will allow.

There will likely always be some struggle between the public's right to know, and what the military can release for security reasons, but both sides interviewed here feel that building up relationships between each other can help smooth that tension and lead to better and more well-rounded coverage of all military activities.

Recommendations

In order to provide useful and relevant information to the media as well as the public who visit the Multi-National Force – Iraq website, the public affairs staff needs to make sure the site is kept up-to-date at all times. In addition, the staff should strive not just to post facts, figures, and stories on individual incidents, but also to work with leadership to interpret those facts and provide an overview of how individual incidents in Iraq fit into the overall picture of what is happening in the country.

When resources and manpower allow, the military needs to make every effort to gather feedback from the members of the press who use its websites. Whether through surveys, feedback links on the sites themselves or contracted studies, it is important to understand the needs of the users in order to provide them with useful information.

While operational security might prevent a contact list with specific names of public affairs officials for media to contact, a list of generic e-mail addresses and contact phone numbers that media members can use to contact public affairs officials in different regions of Iraq would be useful to reporters covering military operations. In addition, when possible, public affairs officials need to make an effort to develop and maintain

personal relationships with the media who regularly cover the military and the war in Iraq.

Most importantly, the military needs to make every effort to be open and honest in their dealings with the media. Too many incidents in the past, such as the abuse of prisoners in Abu Grhaib prison, and the friendly-fire death of NFL superstar Pat Tillman have caused a feeling of distrust among members of the press. If complete information is not available in the early stages following an incident, only factual and truthful information should be released. As reporters interviewed here commented, the truth eventually comes out, and the military's reputation is severely damaged when public affairs officials and other military leadership puts out false or misleading information.

Future Research

Because so little research has been done on the military's use of websites as a communications tool, there are a lot of possibilities for future research in this area. First would be an in-depth study of media perceptions of not just the MNF-I website, but other military websites, such as the Department of Defense website, and websites for the respective military services. In order to design a website that truly caters to the media's needs, it is important to understand what those needs are.

Part of the purpose of military websites is to give the public a glimpse of what the military is like, what its members go through, and to provide a positive image of military service. Future research could explore whether or not military websites have any effect on the image of the military. In addition, there is a lot of room for research on the military's use of technologies like YouTube and streaming video to put out their own

videos of battles, interaction with the Iraqi people, and humanitarian efforts going on in the country.

Another possible area of research would be an ethnographic study of public affairs officers attending the Defense Information School, where all public affairs officials in every branch of military service receive their training. This could provide a glimpse of exactly how these officials are trained to deal with the media.

One interesting question raised during this study was the idea of the "soldier journalists" writing blogs about their own experiences in the war, which could then be picked up by the media and reported. With the constant struggle between military operational security and the need for the truth to be told, a long-term study of soldiers' blogs, diaries, photo galleries and other areas that give insight into personal experiences of soldiers during conflict and how that information is being used by the media would be an ideal area of study, especially in the field of qualitative study.

Conclusion

While this study was small in scope and the findings are not generalizable to all members of military public affairs or members of the media, in this case, the prominence of the newspapers and experience level of the professionals chosen for the study add to its credibility. This study found that while the MNF-I website has improved over time, media members still find it lacking in relevant and detailed information on what is happening in Iraq. In addition, the study found that while the military-media relationship has made some strides forward since the first Gulf War, especially since Secretary of

Defense Robert Gates took office, there are still ample suspicions on both sides, and further improvements to be made.

Military members interviewed for this study generally felt that the mainstream media was fair in their coverage, but would like to see more positive coverage of the progress they feel the military is making in Iraq. On the media side, the professionals interviewed here felt that the military needed to do more to provide a better interpretation of the overall "big picture" of what's happening in Iraq, and make more of an effort to explain how individual incidents fit into the overall scheme of progress (or lack thereof) in the war in Iraq. In addition, they felt that military public affairs officers should put more emphasis on building relationships with reporters, which they felt could lead to more trust, and a freer and more open exchange of information.

In regards to technology as a communications tool, the study showed that rather than seeing technology as a hindrance or as adding to their workload, all of the people interviewed here felt technology made their jobs easier, and allowed ease of communication between the military and the media from geographically separated locations.

Finally, this study reinforced the idea that a key element in strengthening the relationship between military and media members is one-on-one communication. If the relationship is to continue to improve, both sides must make an effort to understand each other's missions, needs and processes.

With the United States military regularly engaged in missions around the globe, honest and open communication with the media and the U.S. public is more important than ever. While the military has put forth great effort in recent years to try and cater to

the media and provide them as much information as possible, there are still improvements to be made. In order to facilitate accurate and well-rounded media coverage, military officials must do more to give media members the entire picture of military operations, not just in Iraq, but anywhere that U.S. troops are engaged around the world.

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SIUC HSC FORM A

REQUEST FOR APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

By making this application, I certify that I have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research activities involving human subjects. I agree to comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I acknowledge my obligation to:

1. Accept responsibility for the research described, including work by students under my direction.

2. Obtain written approval from the Human Subjects Committee of any changes from the originally approved protocol **BEFORE** implementing those changes.

3. Retain signed consent forms in a secure location separate from the data for at least **three** years after the completion of the research.

4. Immediately report any adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Chairperson of the Human Subjects Committee, SIUC, Carbondale, Illinois - 618-453-4533 <u>and</u> to the Director of the Office of Research Development and Administration, SIUC. Phone 618-453-4531. E-mail: **siuhsc@siu.edu**

Project Title
New Media and the Military Message

RESEARCH ADVISOR'S ASSURANCE: My signature on this application certifies that the student is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human subjects. I am aware of my obligations stated on Form A and will be available to supervise the research. When on sabbatical leave or vacation, I will arrange for an alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence. I will advise the Human Subjects Committee by letter of such arrangements.

_____   _8-26-07_

Researcher(s) or Project Director(s)   Carla Ann Pampe   Date
Please print or type name below signature.

_____   _8/27/07_

Researcher's Advisor (required for all student projects)   Lisa Brooten, Ph.D.   Date
Please print or type name below signature.

The request submitted by the above-named researcher(s) was approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee.

This approval is valid for one year from the review date. Researchers must request an extension to continue the research after that date. This approval form must be included in all Master's theses/research papers and Doctoral dissertations involving human subjects that are submitted to the Graduate School.

_____   _8-31-07_

Chairperson, Southern Illinois University Human Subjects Committee   Date

VITA

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Research Report Title:
    New Media and the Military's Message

Major Professor: Lisa B. Brooten